



Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a germ (virus) that can cause the liver to swell. Most people who have hepatitis B infection can clear the germ from their body. However, in others, the infection never goes away. Long term infection, also called chronic hepatitis B can cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer or liver failure. Usually these problems occur many years after infection.

What are the symptoms?

Some people will have no symptoms. If symptoms do appear, they develop as soon as 6 weeks or as long as 6 months after exposure to the virus and can include:

- Whites of the eye and skin turn yellow
- Fever
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Flu like symptoms
- Tiredness
- Dark brown urine
- Stomach pain
- Grey-colored stools (feces)

How is hepatitis B spread?

The hepatitis B virus is spread when blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or other body fluids from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. This can happen through sexual contact; sharing needles or items like toothbrushes and razors, or when infected blood enters through a cut in the skin. The virus can also spread from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

Can it be treated?

Most people with hepatitis B get better without treatment. There is no treatment to prevent acute hepatitis B from becoming a lifelong infection. Some people who have chronic hepatitis B may be treated with medicine. There is a safe and effective vaccine for those who do not have hepatitis B to prevent infection.

What steps should pregnant women with hepatitis B take?

If you are pregnant, your baby can get infected with hepatitis B during birth. Talk with your doctor about steps you can take now to prevent this. Make sure your baby gets a shot called hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) and the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. Ask your doctor when your baby should get the next dose of hepatitis B vaccine. Once all vaccines have been given, your baby should get a blood test to be sure he or she is protected against hepatitis B. If you have hepatitis B, it is safe to breastfeed your baby, particularly if the baby has received HBIG and hepatitis B vaccine.

How can a person with hepatitis B take care of themselves?

- See your doctor regularly.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Check with your doctor before taking any new medicines, including over the counter and herbal medicines.
- Get a vaccine to protect against hepatitis A and get tested for hepatitis C.

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How can you prevent hepatitis B?

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to get a vaccine against hepatitis B. Other ways to reduce the risk of getting hepatitis B is to avoid contact with blood or body fluids by:

- Using protection such as a condom when having sex.
- Wearing gloves when you will come in contact with blood or body fluids.
- Not sharing a toothbrush, razor or anything else that could have blood on it.
- If you are pregnant, getting a blood test for hepatitis B. If you have hepatitis B, be sure your healthcare provider knows so your baby can be given a vaccine and HBIG.
- Do not inject drugs not prescribed by a healthcare provider. If you do, seek treatment to try and stop. If you can't stop, reduce your risk by not sharing needles or equipment (including cotton, filters, caps, spoons, cookers and alcohol swabs) every time you inject.

If you may have been exposed to the blood or body fluids of an infected person, see a healthcare provider right away.

Who should get the hepatitis B vaccine?

All newborns and children through the age of 18 and adults over 18 who are at risk should receive the hepatitis vaccine. Persons at risk include those who:

- Have sex with an infected person or have multiple sexual partners
- Have a sexually transmitted disease
- Are men who have sexual contact with other men
- Inject drugs or share needles, syringes, or other drug equipment
- Live with a person who has chronic hepatitis B
- Are babies born to infected mothers
- Are exposed to blood on the job
- Are hemodialysis patients
- Travel to countries with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B

If you are uncertain whether you are at risk, ask your doctor.

Who should not get the hepatitis B vaccine?

People who have had a serious reaction to baker's yeast (the kind used for making bread), other vaccine components, or a previous dose of the vaccine should not get hepatitis B vaccine.

